

# **Health Impact Assessment: An awareness raising tool for health and sustainable development**

## **Session 3b**

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### **1. Introduction**

Health impact assessment (HIA) is a tool for facilitating the intersectoral action that has been advocated by policies such as health for all and Agenda 21 for years. HIA is defined as “a combination of procedures, methods and tools by which a policy, programme or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population.”<sup>1</sup> HIA goes beyond providing information – it aims to influence decisions and the people who make them. HIA’s participatory approach brings together people from a range of sectors, and from the community to consider how a proposed policy, programme or project may positively or negatively impact on health. As such, it is an important tool for raising awareness of the wide range of economic, social and environmental influences that determines health.

This paper introduces health impact assessment as means for raising awareness of and making explicit the effects of transport and land-use planning, as well as that of other sectors, on health. The following sections provide an overview of the background and policy context for HIA and the role of HIA local sustainable development planning. This paper focuses on the features and processes of HIA, which are applicable to all sectors. It does not aim to provide explicit examples of HIAs of transport and land-use policies.

### **2. HIA in the context of local sustainable development**

Taking health into account in transport, environmental, urban planning and other sectors means more than mitigating against factors such as air pollution, noise and accidents. Health is not an automatic outcome of well-intentioned policies and programmes. Decisions and investments in a wide range of sectors have a significant impact on health. The health of people living in cities and towns is strongly determined by their living and working conditions, the quality of their physical and socio-economic environment and the quality and accessibility of care services. The health sector is limited in its capacity to respond to these broad determinants of health, making collaboration between sectors essential for improvements to health and the quality of life.

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<sup>1</sup> *Gothenburg Consensus Paper, ECHP, WHO Regional Office for Europe. (1999)*

Significant work has been carried out to make explicit the complex links between health and social issues and transport, urban planning and the environment<sup>2</sup>. However this evidence has not been effectively incorporated into planning frameworks. Project's like WHO's *Health effects and risks of transport systems* (HEARTS <http://www.who.dk/eprise/main/WHO/Progs/HTS/Home>) help to close the gap between evidence and practice through the development of integrated risk assessment tools to allow the quantification of the overall effect of different urban land use and transport policies on human health.

With increasing decentralization of responsibilities in areas which have an impact on health determinants, cities have increasingly become key players for health and sustainable development. Since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, there has been strong emphasis on promoting integrated strategies for sustainable development at the local level. These ideas have been largely championed by Local Agenda 21 initiatives, and a range of sustainable development networks that bring together local authorities at the European and international level. A major weakness of Local Agenda 21, and the sustainable development agenda generally, is that it has not embraced the wider social and health issues which are central to a sustainable future. In addition, health has not been widely recognized a key resource for economic and social development in mainstream policy-making. At most, efforts are made to reduce negative impacts on health through mechanisms such as environmental impact assessments, while opportunities to promote health are not considered. A majority of EIAs in the UK do not consider health or deal with it in only a limited way.<sup>3</sup> A study EIAs in Sweden also found that health impacts are inadequately assessed by EIAs, and that the majority of EIAs carried out do not describe the population affected by projects.

WHO Healthy Cities is possibly the only programme and network of cities that has placed an explicit health focus on sustainable development. Healthy cities, which is based on WHO's health for all policy (Health 21) shares the same principles and processes of Agenda 21. Healthy cities has made progress in raising health and social issues on the agenda of non-health sectors by promoting city wide health development plans. Work on these city health development plans has, for some cities, represented a first attempt to develop joined up planning for health. While the plans have helped to raise health on local agendas and to increase cooperation between sectors, many of the local plans are still dominated by the health and social sectors.<sup>4</sup> In its new programme of work, healthy cities has prioritized health impact assessment as a tool for raising awareness of and mainstreaming health into decision-making. An HIA toolkit for cities is currently under development.

#### 4. Features and benefits of HIA

HIA is based on the values of democracy, equity, sustainable development and the ethical use of evidence, which makes it an appropriate tool to support health for all and local agenda 21-based

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<sup>2</sup> Barton, H. and C. Tsourou. *Healthy urban planning - a WHO guide to planning for people*. Published by Spon Press on behalf of WHO, Regional Office for Europe, 2000. Solid Facts, the social determinants of health (Second Edition). Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2003. Dora, C and M. Phillips. *Transport, Environment and Health*. WHO Regional publications. European series: No. 89. Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Birley, M., Boland A., Davies, L., et al eds. *Health and Environmental Assessment. An integrated approach*. London, Earthscan Publications, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Green, G. Acres, J. and C. Price. "City Health Development Planning" in Tsouros, A & J.L. Farrington (eds) *WHO Healthy Cities in Europe: A compilation of papers on progress and achievements. A working document for the 2003 International Healthy Cities Conference, Belfast, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom, 19-22 October*. Copenhagen, WHO, 2003.

initiatives. Like Local Agenda 21 and Healthy Cities, HIA should be guided by an open and accountable framework for decision-making. HIA as a tool can facilitate the development of integrated planning approaches by providing a mechanism to bring sectors together to discuss health impacts and interventions to eliminate or minimize negative impacts and maximize positive impacts. It can help to build common understanding of health among city stakeholders (politicians, practitioners, community organizations, etc), and of the responsibility individual sectors have in producing health positive outcomes. As HIA is based on a broad model of health, this process does not involve a narrow discussion on health. It considers social, environmental, economic, environmental and cultural issues and how they affect the lives of individuals, communities and populations.

HIA also provides a framework for determining how positive and negative health impacts are distributed across different segments of the population. For example investment decisions that benefit the general population through enhanced employment opportunities may have significant short or long-term negative health impacts on specific social groups or geographic areas. These types of negative impacts most typically fall upon already vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. HIA helps to identify groups at risk and to reduce health inequalities.

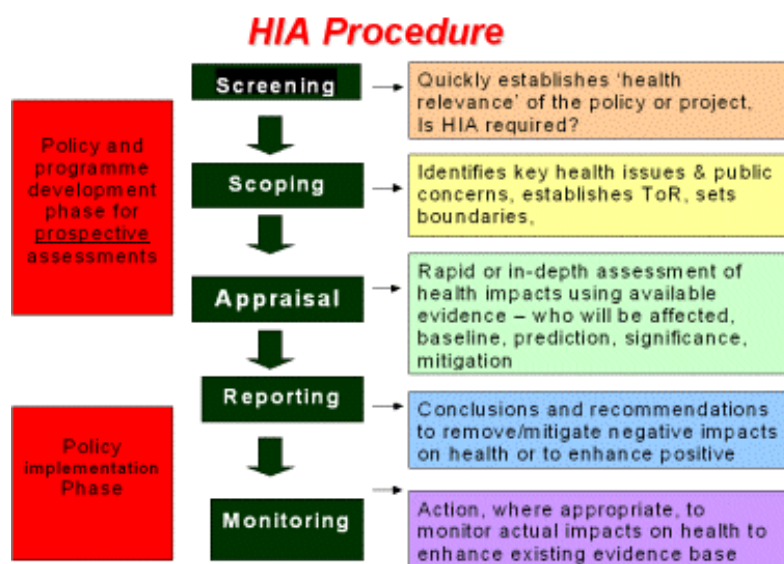
The following summarizes some of the key features and benefits of HIA:

- It is based on the values of democracy equity sustainable development the ethical use of evidence.
- It is based on a broad model of health incorporating health social environmental cultural and economic factors.
- It is participatory and can promote open debate on policy options.
- It makes use of both quantitative and qualitative knowledge on health determinants, including experiential knowledge of the people affected by the policy.
- Various methods can be used in HIA, making it adaptable and useful for a wide range of proposals and policy areas.
- It extends concerns about health from health protection to health improvement. It aims to achieve health gain from non-health proposals. As HIA aims to achieve health gain from non-health proposals, HIA has the potential to eliminate the costs borne to society from negative health impacts that were overlooked during the planning and development of non-health policies.
- It can enhance policy coordination, by bringing sectors together to identify joint interventions for positive health outcomes.

#### **4.1 How does HIA work?**

HIA should ideally be applied prospectively (early in the design and development of policies, programmes and projects), to ensure that health considerations can still influence the decisions at stake. However retrospective HIAs can be useful to assess the consequences for health of policies which have already been implemented.

The classic or traditional HIA procedure has 5 main stages, which are presented in the illustration below.



Source: <http://www.who.int/hia/tools/en/>

HIA can be adapted to meet resource and time restrictions. These types of issues are typically addressed by the scoping stage, where the terms of reference and boundaries of the HIA are determined.

Further information on the procedure is available at <http://www.who.int/hia>.

### 3. HIA as part of a wider policy context

Several international policies and regulations make provisions for, or recommend HIA. These include Article 152 of the Amsterdam Treaty and *Health21* (WHO's health for all policy). Article 152 calls for "A high level of human health protection shall be insured in the definition and implementation of all community policies and activities." A number of procedures have been established to fulfil this article, including the development of health impact assessment tools, however there is more room for HIA in European Policy. *Health21* calls for all Member States to establish mechanisms for HIA and to ensure that all sectors become accountable for the effects of their policies and actions on health. Other policy levers for HIA include impact assessments for which there are long-standing legal frameworks, such as environmental impact assessment (EIA) or strategic environmental impact assessment (SEA).

#### 3.1 HIA in other impact assessments

EIA began in the 1970s in America and today there is a statutory requirement to undertake EIA in many countries around the world. Country specific links for EIA can be found <http://www.art.man.ac.uk/EIA/link.htm>. In Europe EIA has a statutory basis through EU directives introduced in 1985 and amended in 1997.<sup>5</sup> In 2001 the EU adopted a directive on SEA. "SEA developed out of the recognition that the environmental impact assessment of specific projects, whilst an extremely valuable device, does not allow sufficient scope for the examination of the effect of a combination of projects. A commitment to sustainable development requires that a strategic approach to the environment be adopted."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See the full text at <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/eia/full-legal-text/9711.htm>

<sup>6</sup> See the glossary of terms on WHO's HIA website at <http://www.who.int/hia/about/glos/en/index2.html>

Health has not typically been explicit in EIA or SEA. Although health is underlined as a key issue of EIA, little has been done to involve health professionals or to take into account the wide range of possible health and social impacts. EIAs are often conducted at project level, as opposed to on umbrella policies and programmes.

At the 3rd ministerial conference on environmental health held in London in 1999, several countries supported the idea of a protocol on strategic environment and health impact assessment. Following, WHO, in close collaboration with the UN/ECE has been involved in a process which has resulted in the inclusion of a strong health dimension in a new Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Protocol. The SEA Protocol is set within the framework of the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in a Transboundary Context (Espoo, 1991). The new Protocol ensures that health considerations are taken into account, by requiring its Parties to evaluate both the environmental and health consequences of their policies. The Protocol, which was adopted at the 5th Ministerial Conference 'Environment for Europe' (Kiev, Ukraine, 21-23 May 2003), has been adopted by 36 countries. HIA and SEA will be cross-cutting themes of the next Environment and Health conference in Budapest 2004.

### **3.2 HIA – an option, not a legal requirement**

At present, HIA in Europe (as a stand alone assessment) is not supported by legally binding frameworks, as is the case for EIA and SEA. The integration of HIA into SEA presents an opportunity to promote understanding between the SEA and HIA communities, clarify and to build an understanding of the overlaps between the determinants of health and the environment. The SEA Protocol represents a first step towards the institutionalization of HIA and presents an opportunity (and a challenge) to build technical and institutional capacity to carry out HIAs in decision-making processes.

The above case of SEA illustrates the potential benefits of integrating health or HIA into other types of impact assessments. However, the sole integration of HIA into EIA or SEA may also limit the application of HIA to specific planning requirements, depending on the legal specifications. While the integration of HIA into EIA or SEA is a positive step forward, it should not limit the potential use of HIA to support the development of healthy public policies.

In addition to the impact assessment tools mentioned above (HIA & SEA), there are a number of other types of impact assessment tools in the policy environment, including social impact assessment (SIA), human impact assessment (HuIA), integrated impact assessment (IIA), sustainability assessments, economic impact assessments and equity audits. More information on other types of impact assessment tools is available on the website of the International Association for Impact Assessment (<http://www.iaia.org>)

## **4. A tool to raise awareness of health**

HIA has the potential to raise awareness and understanding the wider determinants of health within local government, local organizations or partnerships, as well as within the wider community. By introducing HIA in local government, a shared understanding of health and health determinants can be developed. This includes an awareness of the role different sectors have on health outcomes, and the development of a sense of responsibility for taking health concerns into account during planning. Many cities introduce HIA through stakeholder workshops and training events.

The HIA framework itself helps to raise awareness of the health effects of non-health sector decisions on health. For example, screening tools help sectors to identify whether new policies or plans will have a health impact, and the groups which will benefit or suffer the most from those impacts. Working through the steps of HIA helps to inform each stage of the decision-making process. The scoping and appraisal steps bring together stakeholders from a range of disciplines. It has the knock-on effect of raising awareness of the value of integrated approaches to local governance and the value of tapping the experiential knowledge of communities. Several cities, such as Belfast, are developing tools to enable communities to carry out HIAs. The overall results of HIA contribute to the body of knowledge of policy choices on broad health determinants.

Case studies of a number of HIA's carried out in the United Kingdom point to the HIA process as an important awareness-raising tool. The following is an excerpt from a case study of an HIA on a housing policy:

*'We have found that HIA offers a useful tool for raising awareness of public health issues, highlighting the multi-faceted nature of health determinants and getting these concerns onto the local public policy agenda. The process of HIA has also proved to be a helpful framework for developing a common language and focus of work with partner organizations under a common set of objectives, which may or may not be directly health related.'*<sup>7</sup>

A case study of the HIA of a redevelopment project cited the following benefits and successes<sup>8</sup>:

- *Raising awareness of wider health issues and the benefits of intersectoral working.*
- *The process raised awareness of health impacts of land-use planning in the local authority, and the HIA approach was then used in further local authority work.*
- *Taking part in the HIA acted as training in a useful approach, which people felt they would be able to use in their work.*
- *An increase awareness of the need for community involvement in planning. Until HIA had been undertaken, there had been little awareness in the community of the regeneration plans even though they were well advanced. The local people appreciated greater involvement in the planning process. The HIA was used to provide a community voice for influencing the actual uses of the redevelopment.*

At the European level, HIA has been a useful advocacy tool for making explicit the health effects of transport on health, in the lead up to the adoption of the Charter on Transport, Environment and Health. 'The HIA framework added value to the policy debate by highlighting the links between decisions made in the transport sector and the wide range of health risks and benefits that these entail.'<sup>9</sup>

All decisions are influenced by values, evidence and the availability of resources.<sup>10</sup> Many decisions also come under the pressure of organized interest groups. Decision-makers may not

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<sup>7</sup> Barnes, R. *Shepherds Bush Housing Association. Assessing the health impact of housing policy...work in progress.* Case Study 8.5.1., available on the HIA Gateway at <http://www.hiagateway.org.uk>

<sup>8</sup> Cotterill, A. and K. Lock. *HIA of Houldsworth Mill Redevelopment, Stockport (1998).* Case Study 8.4.7., available on the HIA Gateway at <http://www.hiagateway.org.uk>

<sup>9</sup> Dora, C. & F. Raccioppi. *Including health in transport policy agendas: the role of health impact assessment analyses and procedures in the European experience.* Bulletin of the World Health Organization 2003, 81 (6). <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/81/6/en/dora.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> This is discussed further in Ison, E. *A resource for health impact assessment. Volume 1.* October, 2000 available at [http://www.phe.gov.uk/hiadocs/VOL\\_I\\_Resource\\_for\\_HIA\\_1.pdf](http://www.phe.gov.uk/hiadocs/VOL_I_Resource_for_HIA_1.pdf). See sections 4.1 and 4.2 for a discussion of the role of HIA in decision-making and how HIA can be incorporated into an organizations partnership work.

have explicitly shared values. Values influence the how evidence and pressure groups will influence decisions. Marginalized groups in society, which tend to share the greatest burden of negative health impacts, usually do not have an organized lobby to represent their interests.

There is not a linear process between producing HIA recommendations and a decision – HIA is does not replace political judgement. However, by embedding HIA in routine planning frameworks, health, and equity in health, can become mainstream concerns for local decision-makers based on the best available evidence. HIA provides a transparent and accountable framework for bringing together available evidence and the views of stakeholders to inform decisions.

## 5. Limitations of HIA

HIA is still a developing methodology, which is not yet widely applied at the local level in Europe. Significant work has been done in a number of European countries which help to build understanding of some of the barriers of HIA and how they might be overcome. Barriers to HIA at the local level may include a lack of awareness of the value of HIA and broad health determinants, lack of experience and capacity, gaps in the evidence base or a crowded local policy agenda. WHO as an organization is supporting governments at national and local levels to overcome these and other barriers by bringing together evidence and by developing a range of tools to support HIA.

More information on WHO's work on HIA is available at the following sites, which includes links to a number of nationally based organizations.

- Health impact assessment methods and strategies (HMS). <http://www.euro.who.int/eprise/main/WHO/Progs/HMS/Home>
- WHO Health Impact Assessment web site. <http://www.who.int/hia/en/>
- WHO Healthy Cities. [http://www.euro.who.int/healthy-cities/UrbanHealthTopics/20020116\\_2](http://www.euro.who.int/healthy-cities/UrbanHealthTopics/20020116_2) (To be updated shortly with information on a new project to support local level HIAs).

## 6. Conclusion

In spite of more than a decade of practice in local sustainable development planning, there are still significant barriers to joining up policy agendas and there is a lack of understanding of what promotes integrated approaches. HIA is a tool for raising awareness of the health effects different sectors have on health and building understanding of how sectors can work together towards common objectives. It supports integrated planning and decision-making by providing evidence-based recommendations on proposed policies, programmes and projects.

HIA involves a wide range of stakeholders in a process which identifies both positive and negative impacts on health, and the distribution of those impacts across the population. In other types of impact assessments, health concerns may be reduced to the negative effects of pollution on health, limiting opportunities to promote health, social inclusion and to maximize environmental and economic sustainability. HIA raises awareness of broad health determinants, contributing to a shift in thinking about health in terms of diseases and injuries to a resource for economic and social development.

The HIA process has the potential to:

- Increase awareness about the health effects of plans for transport, the built environment housing, social services, education, etc.
- Establish a shared understanding of health (in the context of sustainable development) among a wide range of stakeholders.
- Create a sense of responsibility for health among sector representatives, while providing a clear process for taking action to improve health.
- Identify interventions to minimize negative and maximize positive health outcomes, based on intersectoral action.
- Place health at the heart of policy-making.
- Provide a systematic approach for integrating the principle of equity into decision-making.
- Provide a better understanding of local needs for public services and the way they are used, enabling sectors to better target resources.
- Highlight opportunities to coordinate actions across sectors.